CHILDREN AND WRITERS INTERACT - AN EYE-OPENER

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"Give us more humour ... everything is so serious!"

"... more exciting adventure and mystery!"

"... more school stories!"

"... more science fiction!"

It was a clamour by child readers for better books by Indian authors. Books that were of gripping interest ... books that were relevant to their own problems ... that carried more appealing illustrations ... and which brightened their spare hours.

This lively interaction between children and authors was organised by AWIC. The children, all below 12 years, came from AWIC home libraries in farflung Delhi colonies like Rohini, Greater Kailash, Paschim Vihar etc. Children from the 'Love and Care' mobile creche also participated. Our guest of the day, Mrs. Ramdas, wife of India's Naval Chief, watched with keen interest, putting in occasional questions herself.

Broadly speaking, the children fell into two categories - those who attended English medium Public Schools and read exclusively in English, and those studying in Government Schools and read books in Hindi. The latter belonged predominantly to the economically weaker classes. This divide was reflected in their reading tastes as well.

AWIC authors were in for an initial shock. Many of the readers in English were unaware of the existence of children's books in English written by Indian authors. This seemed incomprehensible considering that AWIC libraries stock all these books, with the purpose of promoting Indian authors and illustrators.

However, it was heartening for AWIC authors that most of the other children present agreed that "Indians write much better" than their western counterparts.

"Story books by foreign authors, as in *Hardy Boys*, follow a monotonous course after a while ... I get bored."

"It is difficult to understand the background of foreign books."

"It is difficult to form an image..."

"We know India better ..."

These were some of the comments in favour of Indian writers. Ruskin Bond, Dilip Salwi and Arup Kumar Dutta figured high on the list of favourites. "Give us more books like *A Passage to Antarctica*," was an enthusiastic remark. Quiz books were also appreciated.

Yet ardent fans of Enid Blyton, Franklin Dixon, Carolyn Keene and more recently, Roald Dahl, felt that these foreign books were "more exciting and entertaining". Effective illustrations added to their interest. "The illustrations on the cover of the *Hardy Boys* series depict the main idea of the story," a young reader explained why these books attracted more.

Children who read in English enjoyed mystery, adventure, science fiction and non fiction,

especially pertaining to science. Poems and plays were of little interest. Authors wondered why they didn't read books in Hindi, when they spoke the language at home.

"Hindi books are not very interesting ... not adventurous enough," was an explanation. Unattractive illustrations and production were other deterrents.

On the other hand, child readers of Hindi books liked moralistic stories, folktales, and enjoyed poems and plays. They also liked reading life histories of great men, humorous pieces and 'big books'. Many of these children had no televisions at home, and books became their major source of entertainment. This group was hampered by the lack of available translations of good works into Hindi. Here, Mrs. Ramdas observed, "There is a limited range of topics in the vernacular while English reading children have access to a wide range of books ... with or without libraries."

For the younger age group, a book became a loved possession, something to touch, gaze at and even smell. The smaller children of both categories enjoyed books with lots of pictures and colours. For them, good production was an important factor in choosing a book.

Older children faced a variety of problems, which inevitably affected their reading habits. There were many complaints about "a big homework load", "no time for play", "no activities in school", "the system of education should be changed ..." Although these children generally preferred full length fiction because of "greater satisfaction" and "more involvement", it was difficult to find enough time to read these books. "The link breaks," a young boy explained earnestly. So most children settled for short stories. They were easier to read and finish in between homework and a tight daily schedule.

Some children would like to see their problems feature in the stories they read. However, others pleaded, "We already see so many problems over T.V. We wouldn't like to see them in our books!" These children added, "We find violence boring ... there is so much of it on T.V. There is *mirch masala* in every film!" A book was preferred to its filmed version because it could keep one engrossed for many hours.

On an average, the children present read four or five books a week. However, it must be remembered that these ardent book lovers are exceptional. Very few of their classmates discussed books in school. "Everybody talks about the T.V. serials, *Star T.V.* ... There is nobody to discuss books with," lamented a little reader not more than three feet high!

Speaking of writing style, a ten year old commented, "Style is an integral part of writing. The way you put forward stories matters. It should be something that keeps your interest. If you read five pages and get bored, there is no point reading on ..."

Now that is really food for thought!

In fact, this animated discussion proved to be a valuable feedback for authors, illustrators and librarians, and a collective eyeopener of sorts. After the session, they were asking themselves many questions... Are our AWIC library members being guided adequately in the selection of reading material, especially that written and illustrated by Indians? What is more, are we, as authors, writing the kinds of books that children really want? Keeping in view that today's child reader is already exposed to so much reality through the electronic media that has invaded our homes, are we being too protective, too evasive, too simplistic in our stories? Books like Dahl's *Matilda* which are fiercely critical of the adult world have, after all, proved immensely popular with children and done no conceivable damage. Perhaps it is about time we emerged from our ivory towers into the new age that our children are already living in!